

Make a Friend - Be A Peer Mentor



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Youth in Action

Make a Friend – Be a Peer Mentor

What Is Peer Mentoring?

Peer mentoring programs match older youth with young students in one-on-one relationships to provide guidance for the children. Through this special relationship, peer mentors provide advice and support and serve as role models for younger people who need help. Challenges facing those being mentored include problems with schoolwork; social issues, such as pressure to drink or smoke; family problems or tension; and other typical difficulties of growing up. A peer mentor can also simply be someone for a younger student to hang out with.

Mentoring programs, when carefully designed and well run, provide positive influences for younger people who may need a little extra attention or who don't have a good support system available to them. For example, a young person who has recently lost a parent or close family member or who has experienced neglect or abuse or who simply feels lonely or uncomfortable in large group situations may especially benefit from the support, attention, and kindness of a peer mentor, along with other supports.

What Does Mentoring Do To Prevent or Reduce Crime?

For many children, having an older youth to talk to and spend time with -- someone who provides encouragement and friendship -- can mean the difference between dropping out of school and graduating, or between getting involved with drugs and developing the strength and self-confidence to resist such pressures. Youth involved in mentoring programs, in fact, have been shown to be less likely to experiment with drugs, less likely to be physically aggressive, and less likely to skip school than those not involved in such programs.¹ Peer mentors provide the important extra support that many younger people need to make it through a difficult period in their lives -- when peer pressure and the desire to fit in are strong influences.

¹ For more information on the study showing these results or on other effects of mentoring, get a copy of *Mentoring -- A Proven Delinquency Prevention Strategy*, an Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) Bulletin, available at no charge from the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse (JJC), listed in the [Resources](#) section.

What Does It Take To Start a Mentoring Program?

To be effective, a mentoring program requires training for potential mentors, careful matching of mentors and children being mentored, and ongoing support to maintain and improve the mentoring relationship. To meet these goals, your group should learn about and develop ties to organizations in your community that offer services or provide information that would be helpful for you and those you are mentoring.

Inform your mentors of available resources and encourage them to use them and recommend them to others as appropriate. In many areas, local Big Brothers Big Sisters organizations have set up a program called High School Bigs in which high school students volunteer to be Big Brothers or Big Sisters to elementary, middle, or junior high school students in their community. With about 100 High School Bigs programs already in place across the Nation, you're likely to find one in your area. Contact Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, listed in the Resources section, to find out how to link up with one of these efforts to take advantage of existing training, matching resources, and support services.

If you decide to start your own program, get in touch with national and local mentoring organizations -- such as The National Mentoring Partnership, listed in the Resources section -- to find out how they began and how they currently operate. Also contact national service organizations such as the Corporation for National Service and AmeriCorps, listed in the Resources section, for general advice and guidance on mentoring and a wide variety of other volunteer work. The IdeaList Web site (www.idealists.org) is another great source of information on mentoring -- listing 16,000 volunteer organizations and numerous books, organizations, and services that your volunteers may find useful.

When starting your mentoring program, decide what the minimum (weekly or monthly) time commitment for mentors should be. Include time required for training, meeting with the young person being mentored, following up on any issues that arise, attending sessions with other mentors, and learning about available resources. Emphasize to your volunteer mentors that they must not only serve as role models, but be able to provide sound advice and accurate information on issues ranging from schoolwork to family relationships to peer pressure. If tutoring will be part of your program, recognize that you will need to match the academic and interpersonal skills of the mentor with the educational needs of the youth being tutored. Obviously, personal compatibility is at the core of the match. You may have to assign pairs more than once before finding just the right match.

Next, consider where and how you will recruit or identify younger people to be mentored. A school's guidance office or a community day care or recreation center may be able to work with your program and supply names of students in need of support or guidance. Sometimes you can work with or "adopt" a single elementary, middle, or junior high school in your area and mentor students from that school only. In that case, you may be able to develop strong ongoing relationships with teachers, counselors, and administrators in the school and meet regularly in the school's cafeteria, auditorium, or classrooms. In addition, fewer transportation obstacles will exist when dealing with only one school. Having safe activities in convenient locations is essential.

Once you have decided whom you will be mentoring, talk with the parents or guardians of these children to secure their understanding of and commitment to your program. Explain how the mentoring process will work and the potential benefits to the children being mentored. One of the most important steps in creating a mentoring program is training your volunteer mentors. To do so, think about the following questions:

- ◆ What kinds of activities are popular with the students you will be mentoring?
- ◆ How much help should mentors give with schoolwork?
- ◆ What should mentors do if they suspect a problem in the home of a child assigned to them?
- ◆ What do mentors do if a younger person says that he or she has been a victim of crime or has committed a crime? What if the child has experienced abuse or neglect?
- ◆ What can mentors do to influence their young friends' lives in a positive and lasting way?

The answers to these questions will help you create a framework for both your training program and your ongoing program activities. Spending time observing or working with an established mentoring program can also give you many good ideas.

Considering the complexities of organizing a mentoring program, you may want to work with a school counselor or a community group that can provide initial assistance with management and training. Starting the program with a small number of matched pairs is another good idea. As your program staff become more experienced and as interest grows, you can increase participation.

What Does It Take To Keep a Mentoring Program Going?

Mentors should schedule routine visits with those they are mentoring and should be absolutely committed to keeping those appointments. Because they play such an important role in the lives of their assigned young friends, mentors need to treat every scheduled meeting, tutoring session, and outing -- even something as casual as meeting to share a soda after school -- as a high priority.

Most mentoring programs recommend that pairs meet at least once a month -- and more frequently in the beginning of a relationship. OJJDP's Juvenile Mentoring Program (JUMP) calls for a significantly greater time commitment, recommending that mentors meet with their assigned young friends three times a month for 4 hours each time (a total of 12 hours per month) and requiring no less than 1 to 2 hours per week (totaling 4-8 hours per month).² Whatever time commitment you decide on, your program coordinators will need to check regularly with mentors and make sure that they are meeting this requirement. Mentors helping with schoolwork may need to arrange more frequent meetings.

Your training program should show mentors how to take advantage of all kinds of situations -- even running errands with the younger person -- to create opportunities for learning and thoughtful, caring communication. Supply mentors ideas for social outings. Recommend, for example, participating in a book group for youth at a local library; visiting a museum or park; attending a concert, movie, or sporting event; taking part in community festivals; or doing volunteer work together for elderly or needy residents in your community. Encourage mentors to help their young friends develop new interests and have exciting new experiences. It may be possible for members of your group to obtain discount tickets to programs or shows at theaters, concert halls, museums, or other community establishments.

Planning a Successful Project

For more information on how to plan a successful project, see the National Youth Network's *Planning a Successful Crime Prevention Project*. This 28-page workbook explains the five steps of the Success Cycle:

- Assessing Your Community's Needs.
- Planning a Successful Project.
- Lining Up Resources.
- Acting on Your Plans.
- Nurturing, Monitoring, and Evaluating.

The workbook includes six worksheets for you to take notes on. You can get a copy of this planning workbook from the Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse, listed in the Resources section. Good luck!

The primary element required for an effective mentoring program is time. Every mentor agrees to a minimum time commitment, as does the younger person being mentored.

Community support is another important ingredient. Volunteers can staff the program (as mentors, trainers, coordinators), but support from persons outside your group is also required for the program to be a success. Adults may form an advisory board or resource group to offer ideas and serve as a link to community training, services, and activities for your program. Teachers, administrators, counselors, and librarians from your local schools, for example, may agree to meet with mentors once a month to answer questions, provide lesson plans, and offer tips on how best to show support and provide guidance to the children being mentored.

² For more information on JUMP and other mentoring programs, refer to OJJDP's Bulletin, Mentoring -- A Proven Delinquency Prevention Strategy, available at no charge from JJC, listed in the Resources section.

What Are Some of the Challenges of a Mentoring Program?

Investment of self and time is a major challenge for mentors, and it should not be taken lightly. Failing to follow through with a relationship -- by canceling or not showing up for a meeting or by just not demonstrating enough attention and support to someone who depends on and looks up to you -- is worse than never getting involved in the first place. It is sometimes difficult for volunteers to understand this. Before you assign them to someone, make sure that your mentors appreciate the importance of the role they'll be playing and that they're ready and able to keep their commitment to a younger person.

Compatibility is another challenge for mentoring programs. Your group should have a plan for dealing with situations in which the mentor and youth just don't get along. When that happens, each person needs to understand that there is no blame, simply a need for a different match. A new match should be made as soon as possible.

Mentors need to be patient. It is difficult to realize that a younger person may not be immediately grateful for your kindness, attention, and friendship. Positive changes may not show up for several months. A friendship may grow steadily for a while and at other times may seem stuck. In either case, both parties need to give the mentoring relationship a chance to grow.

Relationships between mentors and the parents of children being mentored are also occasionally sensitive. Though they sometimes feel jealous of or threatened by mentors, parents need to understand that mentors are not trying to take over the role of parents. Mentors, in turn, need to respect and support parents' rules and concerns for the children while building their own relationships.

What Are Some of the Rewards?

Successful mentors may earn satisfaction from knowing that they have helped their young friends to develop strong relationships with older peers, learn life skills, or master academic subjects. They may see significant improvements in academic performance, behavior, or communication skills in the young people they are working with and know that they have played a part in those changes.

The youth being mentored also receive a variety of rewards. These range from such short-term benefits as higher grades and positive feedback from teachers, parents, and friends to such long-term benefits as greater self-confidence, stronger communication skills, and the strength to resist peer pressure -- all of which will make them more likely to become productive, happy adults and assets to their communities.

How Can a Mentoring Program Be Evaluated?

Evaluating your project can help you learn whether it has met its goals, but only if you decide up front what you want to evaluate and how you will go about doing so. The purpose of conducting any evaluation is "to answer practical questions of decision-makers and program implementors who want to know whether to continue a program, extend it to other sites, modify it, or close it down."³ In particular, you will want to be able to show that your mentoring program does one or all of the following:

- ◆ Improves the grades or other measures of academic performance of the youth being mentored.
- ◆ Improves school attendance for those being mentored.
- ◆ Reduces rates of truancy, suspension, expulsion, and dropout for those being tutored.
- ◆ Improves mentored youth's self-esteem and confidence.
- ◆ Teaches mentors valuable communication skills.
- ◆ Teaches mentors the importance of commitment and sensitizes them to the needs, experiences, and situations of other members of their community.
- ◆ Strengthens community ties by creating opportunities for youth to work with and learn from younger and older members of the community.
- ◆ Dispels or reduces stereotypes, misconceptions, or fears that members of different age groups in the community may have held about others prior to the program.

Evaluating a peer mentoring program requires both short- and long-term perspectives. In the short term, regular check-ins with mentoring pairs and careful monitoring of recruitment and training will help to keep the program on the right path. In the long term, following up with youth who were mentored to determine how the relationship affected them can provide important data on the program's success.

In addition, both mentors and the youth being mentored should have a regular opportunity to evaluate the program. Ask them what they find most valuable and what they believe should be changed. Secure such input by administering a survey every month (or week) or by having a hotline or suggestion box available at all times. The following are examples of questions to ask both mentors and the persons being mentored when evaluating your program:

- ◆ How did the peer mentoring program help you?
- ◆ What were some of your favorite activities with the program?

- ◆ What were some of your least favorite activities?
- ◆ How did the program compare with your expectations?
- ◆ How do you think the program could be improved?
- ◆ Would you recommend this program to your peers?
- ◆ What did your mentor do especially well?
- ◆ In what areas did he or she need improvement?

In evaluating your peer mentoring program, also consider whether and how it meets the following more general crime prevention goals:

- ◆ Reduces crime or fear of crime.
- ◆ Educates and informs a target audience.
- ◆ Is cost effective.
- ◆ Has a lasting impact.
- ◆ Attracts support and resources.
- ◆ Makes people feel more positive about being a member of their school or community.

Be sure to include an evaluation step in your mentoring program's overall plan. Ask yourself what you can do to meet the many different needs of the youth being mentored and how you can recruit more mentors and provide services to a greater number of young persons in your community. Take a good look at the input you receive from mentors and the children being mentored. Then, make adjustments to strengthen your program.

Learning to evaluate the things you do is a good skill, one you can apply to all aspects of your life. Good luck with your mentoring project and -- Be a good role model!

³ National Crime Prevention Council, *What, me evaluate?* Washington, DC: National Crime Prevention Council, 1986.

Resources

For more information, contact one of the following organizations or visit the U.S. Department of Justice Kids Page Web site at www.usdoj.gov/kidspage. This site includes information for kids, youth, parents, and teachers.

America's Promise -- The Alliance for Youth

909 North Washington Street, Suite 400
Alexandria, VA 22314-1556
888-55-YOUTH
703-535-3900 (Fax)
Internet: www.americaspromise.org

AmeriCorps

1201 New York Avenue NW.
Washington, DC 20525
202-606-5000
Internet: www.americorps.org

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America (BBBSA)

National Headquarters
230 North 13th Street
Philadelphia, PA 19107-1510
215-567-7000
Internet: www.bbbsa.org

Boys & Girls Clubs of America

1230 West Peachtree Street NW.
Atlanta, GA 30309
404-815-5700
404-815-5789 (Fax)
Internet: www.bgca.org

Corporation for National Service

1201 New York Avenue NW.
Washington, DC 20525
202-606-5000
Internet: www.nationalservice.org

Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse (JJC)

P.O. Box 6000
Rockville, MD 20849-6000

800-638-8736
301-519-5212 (Fax)
Internet: www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org

National Crime Prevention Council

1700 K Street NW., Second Floor
Washington, DC 20006-3817
202-466-6272
202-296-1356 (Fax)
Internet: www.ncpc.org

The National Mentoring Partnership

1400 I Street NW.
Suite 850
Washington, DC 20005
202-729-4340
202-729-4341 (Fax)
Internet: www.mentoring.org

Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)

Special Emphasis Division, JUMP
Coordinator
810 Seventh Street NW.
Washington, DC 20531
202-307-5911
Internet: www.ojjdp.ncjrs.org

Save the Children

54 Wilton Road
Westport, CT 06880
877-Be-A-Mentor
Internet: www.savethechildren.org/mentors

YMCA of the USA

101 North Wacker Drive
Chicago, IL 60606
312-280-3400
Internet: www.ymca.net

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Points of view or opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, BJA, or the U.S. Department of Justice.

The National Youth Network, founded and managed by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, consists of diverse youth leaders from across the Nation who are sponsored by youth-serving organizations. The goal of the Network is to recognize and build upon the power and importance of youth leadership by uniting young people and adults, through communication and action, to enable youth organizations and nonaffiliated youth to have a positive, formidable impact in our communities and throughout our Nation.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance, the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, and the Office for Victims of Crime.